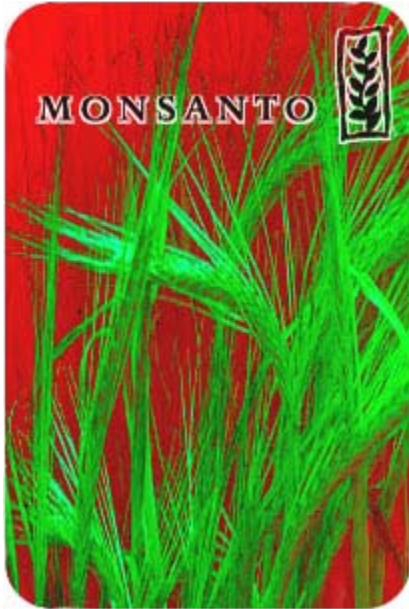


## GM FOODS



If you struggle to understand the scientific issues relating to the genetic modification of crops, do not despair. There is an easier route to understanding what lies behind the national debate on whether we should allow the commercial planting of GM crops in Britain. For GM crops, just think 'Iraq'. This is simply an imperial war by other means.

Yet again the dividing lines are starkly drawn. On the one side you have George Bush, Tony Blair and the giant US corporations (though principally Monsanto). On the other you have most of the rest of humanity. Only the spin makes it look any more complicated.

In the last week, Bush has railed against anti-GM campaigners for inflicting a brutal tyranny upon the lives of Africa's poor. He claims that by refusing to accept GM crops, the West denies Africa the right to feed its way out of poverty. In the gospel according to Bush, GM crop technology would guarantee Africa bumper harvests, food surpluses and cash earnings from the West.

The Blair administration is so convinced of this argument that it has set out to frustrate EU proposals that would effectively require all products containing GM ingredients to be clearly labelled. Other European countries recognise that if consumers are to have a right to make their own food choices then such choices have to be informed ones.

This presents a big problem for the GM multinationals. They have spent millions on PR campaigns that have failed to convince the public that GM crops are either safe or desirable. Segregated supermarket shelves give daily testimony to the fierce divides between GM and non-GM foods that customers insist on in making their food choices. It only adds to the sadness of Labour Ministers acting as Bush's ambassadors in the effort to allow GM corporations to dominate food markets by stealth.

Jack Straw talks of the need to "minimise the risk of alienating the United States". Margaret Beckett warns of the Bush administration becoming "impatient and dissatisfied" with Europe's resistance to GM crops. Only Michael Meacher has the courage to speak out and question whether we need them and whether (ultimately) we know enough to judge them safe?

The most persistent claim about the need for GM crops is an answer to global poverty. The tragedy is that it isn't true and it doesn't work. Biotech corporations have no difficulty in finding poor farmers who will clutch at the short-term lifeline they think is being thrown at them. Longer-term evidence about biotech claims is less convincing.

Stella Semino and Lillian Joensen tell a different tale about the impact of GM crops on poverty, environment and the economy in Argentina. They are members of Gruppo Reflexion Rural, currently touring Europe with warnings about the disastrous consequences of President Menem's 'gift' of the Argentinean food economy to GM multinationals in 1996.

On the surface, Argentina is sold as a success story. It is now the second largest producer of GM soya in the world and supplies over 80% of the world's exported soya oil. Soya bean production has expanded at an unprecedented rate, but so too has the use of herbicides to support it. Currently 10 million hectares of land are soaked in 80 million litres of herbicide to produce a surplus of GM soya with low market prices because no one will buy the stuff, except to feed to cattle.

Argentina has also been plunged into a massive poverty crisis. The number of farmers has fallen by a third in less than a decade. Hunger and herbicides go hand in hand as the shift into GM crop production became a process of farming without farmers. Rather than cutting herbicide use there has been a dramatic increase. Overall costs have risen by over 14% as the 'savings' from not employing farm workers have been overtaken by the increased costs of agro-chemicals.

Just to make life more complicated, a new range of superweeds have emerged across the Argentinean pampas. These are resistant to Monsanto's glyphosate herbicide (marketed as Roundup). Crops are being double sprayed and 'cocktail spraying' (with chemicals banned in the West) is coming back into practice. Even with all this chemical bombardment GM soya yields are 5%-10% less than the yields per acre of non-GM soya. None of these are facts that Monsanto wants European Parliaments or their citizens to weigh up.

In Canada, however, they may take a different view. In the last week the Canadian Wheat Board has threatened a legal challenge to Monsanto's application to grow GM wheat in Canada. Understand the significance of this move.

The Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) is no revolutionary equivalent of Genetix Snowball or the Indian 'Cremate Monsanto' campaign. It is a conservative money focused, farmers and industry group. Their interests are in the \$3 billion export market for Canadian wheat - all of which is non-GM.

What worries the CWB is the knowledge that 80% of their customers do not want, and would not buy, GM wheat (or GM contaminated wheat). If Monsanto were free to plant and grow in Canada, GM contamination would be inevitable and Canadian wheat exports would collapse.

When the website of the Canadian National farmers Union sets out a briefing headed "10 reasons why we don't want GM wheat", it isn't a philosophical discourse on ecosystems. These are hardheaded farmers, making hardheaded decisions about growing crops that the public wish to buy. So why should African farmers view the future in any less sanguine and self-interested terms?

The answer is that they are not being offered this choice. Their poverty and powerlessness makes it so much harder to resist the corporate colonisation of their lands and lives. Paradoxically their best hopes of making their own food choices rely on consumers in the West standing up for the informed food choices that make it difficult to dump GM products into our diet.

Some will argue that the dumping is already taking place, and doing us no harm. Others, like Meacher argue that we know nothing of the sort about harm and risks. The doubling of food related allergies that we now struggle to understand may or may not have a GM connection. The truth is that no one has done the rigorous clinical trials on a revolutionary technology that could have revolutionary consequences. Yet GM companies insist we test their products as though they are no more than a novel cake decoration.

The technology itself demands to be tested as a drug rather than a confectionary.

Get this question wrong and we face a wholly different threat of 'weapons of mass destruction'. In rich nations as well as poor ones we need to insist on the right to send our own weapons inspectors. The government will no doubt come under huge corporate pressure to produce another 'dodgy dossier' to justify a war on sustainable environments. Refusing to cave in to this pressure will shape the future for rich and poor alike.

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